

Family and Consumer Sciences College Students and the Perceived Role of the Internet in Developing a Spiritual Blueprint

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What role does the internet play in developing a spiritual blueprint of meaningful beliefs for decisions in daily life of family and consumer sciences (FCS) college students? Does it influence their spiritual blueprint positively or negatively? What online spiritual activities do students engage in most frequently? A selective sample of 87 female students with some interest in spirituality completed a researcher-designed questionnaire. Fifty-five of these students indicated they were “committed” to a form of spirituality and 32 indicated they were open and “exploring.” Committed participants were significantly more likely to use the internet for spiritual guidance. All participants considered the internet to be a more positive than negative influence in developing a spiritual blueprint that was useful to their daily life. Recommendations are provided for FCS departments related to formal courses, nonacademic settings and programs, and educational activities to help students develop a blueprint of spiritual guidelines.

College students who are planning to become Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) professionals are engaged in complicated tasks and processes as they prepare for meaningful work, relationships, and identities (Arnett, 2004; Barry, Nelson, Davarya & Urry, 2010; Hodder, 2009). Those who develop a set of meaningful beliefs and principles to guide their choices are likely to navigate the complexity successfully (Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor, & Lewis-Coles, 2006; Horton, 2015). More specifically, McGregor and Chesworth, (2005) note that spiritual qualities are essential for navigating daily life and thus are integral to the FCS profession. These qualities include caring, compassion, joy, hope, connectivity with self and others, humility, authenticity, generosity, sense of purpose, forgiveness, and many others associated with well-being (Astin & Astin, 2010; Harlos, 2000; Rockenbach, Mayhew, Davidson, Ofstein, & Clark Bush, 2015). We refer to this set of qualities as a *spiritual blueprint* that students can draft, develop, and flexibly adapt—then use as a guide for making various life decisions, solving challenging problems, and becoming confident FCS professionals (Emmons, 2000; Kimball, Boyatzis, Cook, Leonard, & Flanagan, 2013; Miller & Ewest, 2013; Rehm & Allison, 2009).

Today’s technologically-connected college students are likely to draw upon the internet to gain spiritual information, share ideas, seek higher purpose, find answers to

spiritual questions, and strive to nourish their well-being—a process that Klenke (2007) calls “e-spirituality.” Given unlimited information and proliferating social interactions online (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003), some are concerned that students are unduly influenced in confusing directions (Ameli, 2009; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Hall, Edwards, & Wang, 2016; Yust, 2014). Students often interpret the internet environment as best utilized for a “solo” quest (Kolikant, 2010), leaving out opportunities for deeper spiritually important relationships. In terms of FCS college students, it is not clear if the electronic culture plays a large or small, enriching or corroding, role in the process of developing spiritual guidelines. Therefore, this research study was undertaken to learn more about how FCS college students perceive the internet in view of their spiritual blueprint.

Review of Literature

This study was based on existing knowledge that students can reflectively assess their spiritual needs and strengths in light of personal and social experiences as well as environmental factors (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Because students define spirituality in individualized ways, they each can formulate a personally relevant spiritual blueprint to help them intelligently reflect (Emmons, 2000) on their “possible selves” (Dunkel, 2000; Markus & Nurius, 1986) and apply to enhance everyday life experiences.

Exploring or Committed Spirituality

Hodder (2009) categorized spirituality into two basic expressions, each with advantages and disadvantages, but attracting different types of college students. Some individuals are drawn to open exploration, personalized and tentative beliefs, questions more than definite answers, and unique spiritual practices. Whereas their spiritual blueprint is advantageous for providing creativity and appealing variety, a lack of structure potentially can lead to isolation, transience, and a confusing spiritual base (Wink & Dillon, 2002). Other individuals are drawn toward familiarity, confident answers, stability, and influence of an organized spiritual community. Although they likely have a relatively clear spiritual blueprint, along with deeper shared experiences with like-minded people, this consistency may interfere with spiritual autonomy, probing for depth, and flexibility when change is warranted.

For this research study, the two categories were adapted, designating one group of students as “exploring” because they remain open and tentative as they draft and revise a meaningful spiritual blueprint. The other category was designated as “committed” because those in this group already have a relatively clear blueprint that is useful and valid for them. Despite differences, research shows both types of students include personal meaning, interest in helping others, and concern for human rights (Arnett, 2004; Miller & Ewest, 2013). What is not clear is how each group utilizes the internet to develop a spiritual blueprint; such knowledge could be valuable in assisting a variety of FCS college students in making decisions and generating meaningful experiences.

Positive and Negative Influence of the Internet on Spirituality

Spirituality is empirically associated with numerous “worldly” benefits including academic success (Constantine et al., 2006); protection against alcohol abuse; good mental and physical health (Horton, 2015; Rew & Wong, 2006); and resilience (Astin & Keen, 2006). There are some indicators that online spiritual experiences produce similar

benefits. The emotional process of bereavement can be eased with online memorials, where survivors attest to the memorable qualities of the deceased (Krysinska, Andriessen, & Corveleyn, 2014). Young adults claim that interactivity in electronic communities produces spiritual benefits such as becoming more confident or less depressed (Yust, 2014). Keating (2013) found that online support groups help in dealing with various physical and mental health issues by providing useful information, posting scriptures, demonstrating love, and sharing similar experiences. College students seem to incorporate the internet as a natural extension of their general spiritual experiences. They go online to “fortify rather than to substitute for offline relationships” (Lee, 2013, p. 133) and assess electronic friendships as positive.

In contrast, other researchers have found that the internet interferes with positive spirituality by presenting too many distractions and stealing time from reflection (Bryant, Choi, & Yasuno, 2003)—leading to isolation, self-indulgence, and anxiety (Klenke, 2007). Bryant and Astin (2008) found that many college students spiritually struggle with unexpected circumstances, disruptive events, questions about suffering, or confusion about their identities; it is unclear how the internet is associated with spiritual struggle. Floridi (2011) warns that the deeply spiritual question of “Who am I?” has become “Who am I online?” College students may share too much, put themselves at risk, be captive to shallow associations, and allow the internet too much power in shaping their spiritual development. The constantly shifting information and interactions of the electronic world often comes at the expense of authentic relational communities (Yust, 2014). Given conflicting research results, we wanted to know more about FCS students’ perceptions of the role of the internet in developing a spiritual blueprint—recognizing potential differences between committed students and exploring students.

Purpose of the Research

Therefore, the overall purpose of this study was to investigate the extent that FCS college students draw upon the internet to develop a spiritual blueprint as a guide for decisions and experiences. Specific research questions were: How much time do FCS students spend searching online for spirituality-related information? To what extent do students consider the internet to be helpful in making spiritually meaningful decisions in daily life? To what extent do they perceive the internet influences their spiritual blueprint positively and negatively? What online spiritual activities do they engage in most frequently? Of those who participate in online spiritual communities, what are reasons for doing so?

We also investigated potential differences in internet use between FCS students who were committed to a foundational spiritual blueprint and students who were interested but open and exploring spiritual beliefs. We hypothesized:

- a significant difference in frequency of turning to the internet between FCS college students who were committed to a relatively clear spiritual blueprint of beliefs and principles and students who were exploring, tentative, and open.
- a significant difference in committed and exploring students regarding participation in online spiritual communities.
- a significant difference in the extent to which the internet has influenced committed and exploring FCS majors to question their core beliefs.

Finally, we drew from our findings to discuss educational implications and suggest ideas for practice.

Method

Survey research was used to examine the extent to which FCS college students turn to the internet to explore and experience spirituality and believe the electronic environment influences them positively and/or negatively. Students who were already committed to specific spiritual beliefs were compared to exploring students who were interested but open, flexible, and questioning spiritual ideas.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

This sample was recruited from two required upper-division classes in a family sciences department at a large university, after approval for the study from the university Institutional Review Board. Classes in this department prepare students to work with diverse children, adolescents, and families and develop analysis skills for professional work. Within the broad scope of family sciences, students plan a wide variety of careers in areas such as education, extension, family therapy, nursing, school counseling, and social services.

Students completed a paper and pencil questionnaire during each class on a pre-designated date. The study was described, and informed consent documents were completed before questionnaires were distributed. No names were put on the questionnaires, but each was assigned a number and kept in a separate location. Several participants checked an item indicating that they did not have any involvement or interest in spirituality, and these surveys were set aside and not used for this study. There were only two males, so the researchers also set aside these males' questionnaires and used a female only sample; this made sense given that research suggests some gender differences. Females are more likely than males to use social networks for spiritual issues, engage in spiritual practices, and experience spiritual growth (Crosby & Smith, 2015). Females are also more likely to be conflicted between selfless caring for others and developing their own selfhood (Sointu & Woodhead, 2008). The final sample was 87 females from 18 to 23 years old.

Instrument and Data Analysis

The questionnaire used in this study was based on the research questions, concepts from the literature, and an assumption that each participant could answer items based on their construction of spirituality. Demographic items related to gender, race, age, and religion (if relevant to participant) were included. They were asked about the influence of the internet: "To what extent has the internet influenced your spiritual beliefs?" with options ranging from "no influence at all" to "a major influence." "To what extent has your internet activity influenced your core spirituality in a negative way?" (and a positive way) with options ranging from "no influence" to "a major influence." The frequency ("rarely or never" to "very frequently") to which participants used the internet to practice typical spiritual activities such as attending online spiritual services, engaging in prayer, or practicing generosity with time, money, or other resources was also included in the questionnaire. Frequency data were examined to describe perceptions of the exploring and committed, separately, and combined.

Respondents were divided into those who were: “spiritually committed,” and “spiritually interested but still open, curious, or exploring.” Students who were spiritually committed and exploring were compared using the independent samples t-test, to statistically test our hypotheses and identify any potential differences.

Results

Fifty-five (55) participants were considered spiritually committed: six African American, one Asian, 41 Caucasian, and seven Hispanic. The remaining 32 exploring participants were: one African American, three Asian, 23 Caucasian, 4 Hispanic, and 1 Middle Eastern. Both groups combined were: seven (8%) African American, four (5%) Asian, 64 (74%) Caucasian, eleven (12%) Hispanic, and one (1%) Middle Eastern. Faiths were listed by fewer than a quarter of the sample, but those who did identify were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim. Forty-nine out of 55 (89%) committed participants and 30 out of 32 (94%) exploring participants indicated they spent under one hour per day on the internet with a focus on spirituality.

Descriptive Findings

Internet and Spiritually Important Decision Area

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed the internet had helped them make decisions in important life areas from 1 for “strongly disagree” to 5 for “strongly agree.” Although the differences between the two groups were small, they used the internet for different decision-making areas (Table 1). Committed participants used the internet to the greatest extent for decisions pertaining to their future career, and to the least extent for romantic relationships. Exploring participants used the internet to the greatest extent to boost overall well-being, and least for decisions related to family of origin.

Table 1

Extent of Using the Internet to Make Spiritually Important Decisions

<u>Decision Areas</u>	Committed		Exploring	
	M	SD	M	SD
Romantic relationships	2.82	1.02	2.94	1.19
Future career	3.16	1.10	2.84	1.19
Family of origin	2.90	1.00	2.59	1.04
Overall well-being	3.05	1.13	3.09	1.23
	n=55		n=32	

Internet as Positive or Negative Influence

Participants were asked about the degree to which the internet positively influenced their spiritual blueprint and the degree to which it was a negative influence. Table 2 shows approximately half of the committed participants perceived the internet to

Table 2

The Internet's Influence, Positively and Negatively, on the Spiritual Blueprint

	Positive Influence		
	Committed (n=55)	Exploring (n=32)	Combined (n=87)
Major influence	2 (04%)	7 (22%)	9 (10%)
Moderate influence	15 (27%)	12 (37%)	27 (31%)
Minor influence	28 (51%)	11 (34%)	39 (45%)
No Influence	10 (18%)	2 (06%)	12 (14%)

	Negative Influence		
	Committed	Exploring	Combined
Major influence	0 (-)	0 (-)	0 (-)
Moderate influence	4 (07%)	3 (09%)	7 (08%)
Minor influence	31 (56%)	13 (41%)	44 (51%)
No Influence	20 (36%)	16 (50%)	36 (41%)

have a minor positive influence and about a quarter considered the internet to have a moderately positive influence on their spiritual blueprint. Slightly over one-third of exploring participants considered the internet a positive influence to a moderate extent, and another third reported the internet a positive influence to a minor extent. The internet played a stronger positive influence (moderate) for the explorers than for the committed (minor). The majority of both the committed and exploring participants, 92% and 91% respectively, considered the internet to be negatively influential only to a minor extent or not at all. Although the internet's influence on the spiritual blueprint was perceived more positively than negatively, this positive effect was to a minor or moderate extent and not a major extent for both groups.

Online Spiritual Activities

As indicated in Table 3, fewer than half of participants were involved with spiritually related online activities at least once a week. The committed group participated online much more frequently in traditional activities of prayer, studying scriptures, attending online services, and sharing beliefs. More than one-fourth of all participants practiced forgiveness or generosity in a way that involved the internet, potentially indicating some relational spirituality of the internet.

Table 3

Online Activities Supporting a Spiritual Blueprint at Least once a Week

Activity	Committed	Exploring	Combined
Prayer	25 (45%)	4 (12%)	29 (33%)
Study of scriptures	24 (44%)	1 (03%)	25 (29%)
Attend spiritual services, events	19 (34%)	0 (00%)	19 (22%)
Practice forgiveness	18 (33%)	8 (25%)	26 (30%)
Sharing faith beliefs	17 (31%)	1 (03%)	18 (21%)
Generosity	17 (31%)	8 (25%)	25 (29%)
Online communities	12 (22%)	1 (03%)	13 (15%)

Reasons for Participating in Online Communities

Although some research suggests online communities can be significant for spiritual development (Klenke, 2007), less than one-fifth of exploring and committed students in this study participated in them. When they did participate, it was mainly for communicating with like-minded people and getting personal support or advice as opposed to challenging themselves through debate or engaging in social advocacy (Table 4).

Table 4

Reasons for Participating in Online Spiritual Communities

Reasons	Committed	Exploring	Combined
Idea exchange with likeminded people	19	7	26
Support from others with same needs	15	8	23
Ideas for decisions in my life	12	6	18
Online identity or presence	2	2	4
Debate for different views	2	2	4
Advocacy for my views	1	--	1

Results of Hypotheses Testing

The paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare committed and exploring students for frequency of going on the internet to enhance their spiritual blueprint. A significant difference was found in the frequency scores of those with the committed status (M=1.84, SD=.92) and the exploring (M=1.47, SD=.62) status; $t(83)=2.22$, $p=0.029$, supporting the study’s hypothesis. Furthermore, these results suggest that committed participants generally use the internet more readily or frequently than exploring students to enhance their spiritual beliefs and principles.

Results also indicated a significant statistical difference in online community participation scores of the committed group (M=1.65, SD=.95) and the exploring

($M=1.323$, $SD=.60$) group $t(82.8)=1.99$, $p=0.050$. These results suggest that online community participation differed for the two groups of students, with the committed students participating in spiritual online communities significantly more frequently than exploring students.

Finally, the hypothesis that committed and exploring students would differ in the extent the internet has influenced them to question their spiritual principles and moral guidelines was not supported: Analyses of the data did not show a significant difference in the scores for the committed ($M=1.64$, $SD=.75$) and the exploring ($M=1.94$, $SD=.95$) status; $t(85)=-1.63$, $p=0.106$.

Discussion

This study's sample reported that participants spent less than one hour online daily on spiritual matters, and the time they did spend was viewed as adding a positive influence on their spiritual blueprint—but to a minor or moderate—and not a major extent. These results support researchers who believe that young adults turn to the internet as a supplement or an extension rather than a primary source of spiritual meaning making (Lee, 2013). Rather than considering physical and electronic environments as dichotomous, they appear to seamlessly adapt spirituality to both digital and physical cultures. Whereas these are general time patterns, additional research could concentrate on times when they do engage in intense internet activity for spiritual reasons to determine more specific patterns and gain depth.

Both committed and exploring students seek insight into well-being from the internet, although committed participants might go online for spiritually important future career decisions to a greater extent than exploring participants and exploring students go online for more general spiritual well-being. Perhaps a defined spiritual blueprint facilitates focus on specific life areas of pending importance whereas exploration by its nature may cast a wider net for seeking a sense of generalized well-being.

Many researchers argue that the internet facilitates shallow relationships, lack of focus, struggle, and even nefarious activity (Bryant & Austin, 2008; Bryant et al., 2003; Floridi, 2011). In contrast, nine of 10 FCS students in this study considered the internet to be positively influential to a minor or moderate extent, and negatively influential only to a minor extent or not at all. These results support claims that this generation of “digital natives” incorporate technology as a natural part of their lives (Kolikant, 2010) and are not unduly affected by the vast online frontier open to them. Because this sample was comprised of FCS students, their education in critical thinking, decision-making skills, and healthy lifestyle content might also contribute to their positive use and keen ability to critically assess internet content and activity (McGregor, 1998; Rehm & Allison, 2009).

Both exploring and committed students go online for spiritual activities, but committed students participate more in traditional practices (prayer, scripture, online sermons). Although it was hypothesized that a non-directional difference would exist in the extent each group frequented the internet for spiritual activities, it was somewhat surprising to the researchers that committed students were more inclined to engage online. Additional research could tell us more about questions such as: Do committed students know what they are seeking, and are they limiting opportunities for critical thinking? Do exploring students need more guidance and mentoring to make internet exploration more useful?

Online spiritual activities for both groups were most prevalent for idea exchange with likeminded others, support, and help for decisions—all reasons focused on self-development and personal growth which is appropriate for their stage in life (Arnett, 2004). Although students feel comfortable in the electronic world (Lee, 2013), solo activities were more frequent, with only a quarter of this sample engaged in online spiritual communities. It is interesting that committed students participated to a significantly higher degree than exploring students, perhaps because it is easier to find or belong to a community with others who have a similar and relatively clear spiritual blueprint. It is noteworthy, however, that both exploring and committed students indicated somewhat high frequencies of online forgiveness and generosity of time, money, and talents. These findings reflect some concern for others and relational spirituality, possibly due to the nature of FCS as attracting students who seek a helping profession. Qualitative and quantitative studies could focus on the development of meaningful communities and how they can be used to enhance the spiritual blueprint of diverse members within.

Implications for Educational Practice in FCS Programs

Colleges often give serious attention to grades, test scores, graduation rates, and other quantifiable external indicators of success. Unfortunately, this can lead to neglect of the inner life of meaning, purpose, and connectivity (Rockenbach et al., 2015).

The spiritual realm and the deeper life questions it brings to light *do* play a role in the young adult journey, making attention to these issues on the part of practitioners, administrators, and faculty a clear necessity. Indeed, there are critical implications of struggling spiritually that are intimately tied to the students' sense of well-being and adjustment to the adult world. Failure to recognize the seriousness of these facets of students' lives is to leave them quite alone on their quest to understand central issues of meaning. (Bryant & Astin, 2008, p. 23)

Because online spirituality (Klenke, 2007) is part of the modern search for meaning, it points to a unique area to be incorporated into the practice of FCS college education.

Spirituality at the overall organizational level “allows the human capacity for innovation and creativity to flourish” and “seeks to tap into the fullness of human potential” (Porth, McCall, & Bausch, 1999, p. 211). FCS departments could initiate ongoing attention, dialogue, events, and visuals portraying an environment where spiritual qualities are important. Because course structure is also important (Heischman, 2009), online, traditional, and hybrid academic courses could be offered (Harlos, 2000) to explore philosophical ideas (e.g. What is the meaning of internet spirituality?) and skill-based applications (e.g. How can positive internet spirituality be facilitated? What role does it play?) Individual spiritual qualities (meaning, community, hope, forgiveness, etc.) could be examined thoroughly considering specialized careers such as secondary education, extension, merchandising, and nutrition sciences, to name a few.

Spiritual topics could be layered within typical course offerings. For example, child development courses could teach spiritual development along with cognitive, social, and physical development. Hodge (2005) discovered that memories and experiences with

grandparents deeply affect young adults' spiritual perspectives, suggesting that gerontology or adult development courses could include spiritually focused topics. Team-taught courses in partnership with other programs also interested in enhancing spirituality such as social work or the arts could be valuable.

Service learning and capstone courses are natural places to gain realistic insights that can be applied to their spiritual blueprint. Students could explore ways the internet is used regarding their careers, how it enhances or detracts from qualities of inner life, how it can bring students from different service areas together to dialogue about issues and share challenges and successes. These types of experiences address a community need and, in this process, develop knowledge, attitudes, and actions to create deeper relationships (Bauman et al., 2014; Emmons, 2000).

Most departments of FCS also produce programs and sponsor activities/events outside of the formal classroom to probe specific issues. Workshops, brown bag discussions, guest speakers, book clubs, or other creative methods of programming might be designed and provided by FCS instructional professionals and students. Such activities can take place in libraries, residence halls, student unions, computer labs, and other common areas where varied programs can be set up to assist students' meanings and thus spiritual blueprints. Educational activities could be transferred to online programs, video programs, web sites, webinars, and electronic interactive discussions.

Imaginative activities and assignments can be adapted to guide students in creating a spiritual blueprint. For example, Erasmus (2012) required human ecology students to design a road map depicting detours and crossroads, with which students reflectively considered experiences of process and change, identified new ways of knowing, and could be adapted to reflection on spiritual qualities. Traditional ecograms and genograms can be adapted (Hodge, 2005) to examine spiritual beliefs, major challenges, changes over time, formative relationships, family context, and other issues tailored to their own spiritual needs and interests. Harlos (2000) suggests using fables or case studies to analyze spiritual values. Such activities can help FCS students creatively portray universally acknowledged spiritual notions such as authenticity and compassion, nurture these traits, and apply them to enhance everyday life.

Professors might guide college students through critical thinking and practical reasoning (Brown, 1980; Laster, 1984) to identify and critique spiritual challenges of the internet, examine individual and social contexts, examine diverse perspectives, consider personal meanings, critically examine the oppressive and empowering consequences of interweaving spirituality, the internet, and concrete experiences. Students deconstruct as well as construct, experiencing changes in spiritual interest, activities, and beliefs (Hall, Edwards, & Wang, 2016). Students could compare temporal patterns of internet use and influence on how they draw on spirituality when they face obstacles, what does affect them negatively as they search the internet and what they find valuable, and the role of others or connections with a community in their development of a spiritual blueprint.

Limitations

The study should be considered in view of several limitations. Defining and measuring spirituality pose major challenges (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010), so these results should be interpreted with caution. The cross-sectional nature of the survey is limited to data

obtained at one point in time. Differences across socioeconomic class, race/ethnicity, and gender were not captured in this study. Finally, the results are self-reported data.

Conclusion

Given how little is understood about the role of the internet in shaping FCS students' spiritual blueprint, along with many contradictory findings from the existing general body of literature, more empirical research is needed. Because the notion of a spiritual blueprint appears to be a valuable resource for navigating complex life issues, it is important to support FCS college students and try to understand what they believe and experience spiritually both on and off the internet (Rehm & Allison, 2009).

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